

Accession Number: 3

Classification: Black Community

Date: May 2, 1974

Place: Evanston, Illinois

Interview with: Charles Underwood, Bessie Taylor, Murnal Williams

Interviewed by: Glenna Johnson and Thandie Mvusi

Language Used: English

Observations: This interview took place at Bethel Church. Interview conditions were very poor as the youth choir was rehearsing upstairs and the women's organization was having a pot-luck supper in the next room. These women basically describe how they came to Evanston and what their lives were like here. Mr. Underwood acted primarily as a moderator than as an interviewee.

Mr. Underwood: I think I might qualify this a little, judging from what we've been talking about, I think they're interested in what it was like when you and Mr. Williams came to Evanston. What was the reception, how was work, what were the living conditions. Nothing so personal that it might not be more than just your personal experience. Things didn't turn out as well for many families as it has for these two families. I'm sure these ladies can help you.

Mrs. Taylor: Regardless of what it is I give God the credit whether it is success or whatever strata it lies in, God did it because I have learned that every good thought comes from God, and when if every good thought comes from him you know everything comes from him. God blessed me with a big family of course, I come here in '22 with child. I had a very rough way to go but by God's grace he brought me through all that. It was something else to rear children and keep them in school and get Depression and lose a home, buy another one, scrap that and buy another one, so God has brought me all the way. I do want to say that I was privileged to be here before we ever had the Evanston Hospital, that was built completely since I been here. Everything was just a marsh, just a swamp, just a marsh.

1. Q. Do you mean Community Hospital or Evanston Hospital?

A. I mean Community Hospital. I'm one of the elderly mothers of Evanston. In rearing my family I was blessed to have a family doctor who came to us and took care of us. My children were all born at home not in a hospital so that's something you girls won't experience. From the time that I knew that I was going to have an increase in family I was under a doctor's care straight on through until time for delivery and then that was taken care of. In those days we had a city nurse who would come and see about you for three weeks after the baby was born. I was very well taken care of. It was beautifully done.

2. Q. Did you have one doctor for all your children?

A. One doctor yes. It was Doctor Pen. Rudolph Pen was my family doctor for all my children at home.

3. Q. Doctor Pen was a black doctor?

A. Yes mam! Very much so! He was a marvelous doctor and well qualified. He was a West Indian.

Mrs. Williams: He wasn't our family doctor. Dr. Hill was our doctor.

Mrs. Taylor: Yes, but Dr. Pen was always my maternity doctor.

4. Q. Were black doctors common?

A. Mrs. Taylor: It was much better than it is now. Yes, because you could call them and you could get service and they would come. But they don't come now. You've got to go to the hospital for everything now. You had no trouble getting a doctor.

5. Q. You said you were a youngster when you came. Do you know how old you were?

A. Now if you just want to know, I can't keep all those things straight. I'm 76 years old.

6. Q. And you came in 1922?

A. And I came in '22 so you can figure that out quicker than I can.

7. Q. Were you lucky to have a doctor for all your children or were most women able to have doctors for their children?

A. Well, I don't know. Doctors were plentiful and they wasn't tied up in the hospitals like they are now.

Mr. Underwood: Are you asking whether she was lucky economically in order to be able to afford a doctor? That's what I thought you meant. Well yeah, because while she can tell you about actual costs, but normally rates varied and this is true of most professional people whether they were doctors, ministers, lawyers or what have you, charged more on a basis of what you had and just what their clientele could pay. If Sister Williams could pay a dollar then a dollar was what they charged. If Sister Taylor could pay two then two was charged. They didn't have what you call established fees because they were part of a neighborhood and they came through the Depression like the rest of us.

Mrs. Williams: Charles, my son was very sick. Our doctor told us he needed a specialist, Dr. Sopirs, an ear specialist. We were afraid that we couldn't pay for that. My husband was a foundry worker and we didn't make much money. But he only asked for \$11.00. We thought it was a lot of money but they told us it would be much more if we could have paid more money. We were grateful. When I came to Evanston in 1928 there were street cars up and down Sherman Avenue. The fountain was just a little old thing. All three of my children were born here. When I first came circumstances were very meager.

8. Q. Do you mean money?

A. Yes.

Mrs. Taylor: My husband was here six weeks before I came, I came up the following October. I had a kind of a rendezvous up here with him. I sent him up here to find work while I sold the goat and the chickens. We first lived on Lake Street. I stayed with Mrs. Trent at her home. We had just a room there. In those days her system was you could fix your meals on top of the stove. You could bake only on Saturdays. I could wash either on Monday or Wednesday. Bless the Lord, I was anxious to move.

9. Q. Was Mrs. Trent a white woman?

A. Oh no, she was a colored woman. It wasn't long before I had a child born, in 1923. So I had to get in touch with a doctor and get different quarters. I went from Trent's to MacWilliams' on Jackson. He was a plumber.

10. Q. Were your quarters bigger?

A. Yes, I had privilege! I had freedom! I stayed there about a year and a half. I broke my leg six weeks before my child was born.

11. Q. Were you hospitalized?

A. No, he set my leg on the kitchen table. Before Community or even after, there were few hospitals that blacks could go to.

12. Q. Do you remember the Butler Sanatarium?

A. Yes, Dr. Garnett had a hospital on the 1900 block of Asbury. Mr. Underwood: Many black people were shipped to Cook County Hospital when they were seriously ill or injured.

Mrs. Williams: I was born in Indiana. I came to Evanston in 1928. My health was bad. My folks lived in Chicago. We came up here so my folks could help me take care of myself and the children. My children were born in the house. They went through school in Evanston. My oldest living boy went into the service and moved away. In 1937 we moved to 2042 Darrel where I still live.

13. Q. Do you remember the mounds on the canal bank?

A. Yes. They just channeled it out and just left it there without landscaping it or anything. After enough children got drowned in it they finally landscaped it and put a fence around it. The canal served as a complete buffer between the white and black populations. Whites lived on the North side and Blacks lived on the South side. Though there were always little pockets of black people. Prairie Street had five or six houses.

14. Q. Did you feel any pressure or social ostracism being a newcomer in Evanston?

A. No, I was sheltered from that since my husband had family up here.

Mrs. Taylor: My third home at 2004 Emerson, my husband and brother built. Then the depression hit in 1928. We were not able to make payments on the house. My last baby was born there. All our savings and earnings had been put into that home. We put all of our pennies together but when push came to shove I signed the papers to move. I signed out at 2004 Emerson and took the money for a down payment on 2010 Wesley. My husband was in the ice and coal business for himself. We didn't have refrigerators then. So we made a payment at 2010 Wesley and I've been able to stand on my own two feet since then. I now live at 1512 Pitner Ave.

15. Q Mrs. Williams, can you tell us about when you first established yourself in Evanston?

A. Well, we moved from Indiana, from Anderson, Indiana. I was born in Terre Haute, I'm a Hoosier, three generations and my husband was Kentuckian. We moved from Anderson which was my husband's home. We had two homes there as I say, and we moved to Chicago and I lived with my Mother and Father in Chicago for three years and then I moved to Evanston in 1926 and I brought with me two children to Evanston and the next Spring my son Charles was born in April of 1929. And so he was born at 1909 Foster and so he went to school, my oldest living boy, Hobart, and my two other children Nadine and Charles went when they were old enough to Foster School. We were renting at that time because our homes were built in Anderson and we hadn't disposed of them. We had sold one but we still had the big house. We kept that house for eight years back in Indiana and then finally we sold that house in Indiana and we just rented. And then the depression came. Back in 1937 we bought the next house.

16. Q. You said that you kept the big house for eight years?

A. Yes, but we lived in Evanston.

17. Q. Then you sold the house. Did you sell it as a result of the Depression.

A. Well, we sold it as a, well, yes, no, because my husband was still working in those days. We sold it because, well, we got rid of it, we didn't sell it. We deeded it back to his

Mother and Father. That's what we did with the last house because it was theirs in the beginning and they had given it to my husband and I because he was the only child and his father couldn't live and so the Mother and Father deeded it to my husband and I and we kept that house for eight years and then she wanted to go back and live in Indiana, she didn't like it up here and we decided that since we were young and she wanted to go back to Indiana and we didn't want to go, that we would give her the home back. So we deeded it back to her and we were without a home then, and my husband he worked at Deering Foundry.

Mr. Underwood: John Deere?

Mrs. Williams: Yes. He worked someplace over on the West Side there of Chicago and he nearly killed himself working and so what happened, I was at that time, I used to be Methodist, but at that time I had gone over to Church of God and so I was in Church of God on Simpson Street and my husband wasn't in very good health in those days because his work was killing him and we had these three children, I went to church one night and I asked them if there was anybody that knew that could help him to get up a job where he wouldn't have to work so hard and carry those heavy ladles of iron. And so Mr. Harvey Scott, his wife was there and she heard me asking for prayer for my husband and asking if anybody knew of a job. So what happened is that a few weeks later he came to our house at 1909 Foster and told my husband that he had a job that he would like. So my husband went down into Chicago at 900 N. Franklin and accepted

this job as the janitor and so a few years later Mr. Harvey was let go from this job and so my husband stepped up to be building engineer and so he stayed at this one job then, up until 1963 on that job, one job, when he was force to retire because he had a stroke. In the meanwhile, in 1937 we bought the home where we are now. (Mrs. Williams then related the life histories of her children which were worked out beyond our time period and were not germane to the history of Evanston and thus have not been included in this interview).

Mrs. Taylor: My children finished grammar school, high school, and three of them went to college. My boys were too young for World War II.

Mr. Underwood: In those days there were no incentives to go on through college or even to complete high school. There were no jobs. These children were exceptional. Particularly if you go back to the pre-World War II period. There was no incentive, no encouragement for a Negro child to complete school. If they did it, it was because their parents or somebody just insisted, not because there was anything to look forward to in life. This isn't to say there wasn't no life for Negro kids who went to college but that there was no incentive. A lot of children started dropping out of high school. Even though they have a law today that says children have to go to school until they are sixteen, you won't find any truant officers taking Negro children back to school who start to drop out. I'm speaking of a system that did not provide opportunities for Negro children. That's why parents insisted their children go to school because they knew encouragement was not forth comming from the system.

